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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000322

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FOOD SECURITY STILL AN ISSUE FOR HUNGRY YEMENIS

REF: A. 08 SANAA 1599
[B.](#) 07 SANAA 2193
[C.](#) 07 SANAA 1343
[D.](#) 06 SANAA 2070

[¶](#)1. SUMMARY: Yemenis continue to suffer from high food prices and a lack of homegrown food items. The Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) has responded in a limited and ineffective way to issues of food security. The regional donor response is uncertain, while the international donor response is plagued by either deficient funding or a lack of coordination with the ROYG.

YEMENIS SUFFER FROM HIGH PRICES, DEARTH OF FOOD

[¶](#)2. Yemen continues to suffer from high food prices and a dearth of homegrown staples. Over the last three years, Yemenis have witnessed skyrocketing prices of basic food items, and food prices have been steadily rising in Yemen at least since 2006 (REF C). According to Gian Carlo Cirri, representative of the UN World Food Program (WFP) in Yemen, in 2007, food prices were 75% higher, while in 2008, food prices were up 143%, reaching crisis levels. Cirri characterized Yemen as one of the most food-insecure countries in the world and certainly the most food-insecure country in the Middle East.

[¶](#)3. Once an agriculturally self-sufficient country, Yemen now imports the vast majority of its food. Cirri estimates that Yemen imports 80% and produces only 15-20% of its overall food need. The Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT) estimates that as much as 90% of food is imported. Increased importation of food is due, in part, to a population boom in Yemen. The pervasive demand for qat, however, has encouraged farmers to give up raising edible foodstuffs.

ROYG RESPONSE LIMITED, INEFFECTIVE

[¶](#)4. Overall, the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) has had a limited response to food security issues. Dr. Mohammed A. al-Himiary, Food Advisor at the MOIT, told Econoff on February 15 that food security is an old problem in Yemen. Since the 1990s, the ROYG has approached food security by subsidizing prices of commodities such as wheat, sugar, rice, and grains. Six big traders, however, control the market, importing more than 95% of food into Yemen. As a result, it is difficult for the ROYG to measure market prices, assess stability of food supply, and assure the operation of an open market within Yemen.

[¶](#)5. (C) In response to rising food prices, the ROYG founded a National Food Council in 2007 with limited success. (Note: The Council is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Abdul-Karim al-Arhabi, and includes representatives from both the public and private sectors. End note.) Yet, according to Himiary, the MOIT, not the National Food Council, took the lead in the ROYG response to

the food crisis in 2008 (REF A). (Comment: A more inclusive response would have included members of the Council, and particularly the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC). End comment.) The MOIT has developed a food security strategy, which involves improving commercial aspects and developing systems to elevate nutrition, improving the local production of food via Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation program, and improving the infrastructure and administration of food security. Even with a food security strategy, Himiary admitted to Econoff that MOIT specifically, and the ROYG in general has not approached the problem of food security strategically.

DONOR RESPONSE TO THE 2008 FOOD CRISIS MIXED

¶6. (C) The lack of reliable regional support further complicates the already dire food security problem. Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the UAE pledged 500,000 tons in wheat food aid. Cirri told Econoff on February 11 that he hoped that this food aid would arrive before Ramadan in September 2008. As of February 2009, only 70,000 tons in food aid has been provided. According to a February 16 news report in Al-Thawra, the UAE has agreed to deliver a second installment of wheat in the amount of approximately 65,000 tons. (Comment: In what appears to be a political move, the ROYG plans to disburse the wheat to public employees as well as civil and military retirees, instead of the poor. End comment.) Mohammad Pournik, Principal Economic and Governance Advisor at the UN Development Program (UNDP) in Yemen, told Econoff on February 11 that food aid is not transparent in Yemen. According to Pournik, Emirati food aid

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has been inexplicably delayed; and empty promises are creating a culture of distrust in Yemen.

¶7. In the face of a limited and ineffective regional response, the international donor community is left to pick up the pieces of a broken food-distribution system. In response to the 2008 food crisis in Yemen, Pournik told Econoff that most donors increased food aid; for example, the WFP doubled assistance. Cirri told Econoff that the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the WFP have joined forces in an emergency operation to assist 511,000 Yemenis, starting in January 2009. Himiary told Econoff that the South South Corporation (SSC), a joint Saudi and Jordanian venture, is also preparing new projects in Yemen. Yet, the programs are hampered, again, by a lack of funding and coordination. The WFP project, for example, is reaching only 60% of its requirements in Yemen.

¶8. COMMENT: The lack of food security in Yemen tends to effect rural, poor areas such as Saada, Amran, Hajjah, Lahj, al-Jawf, al-Baidha, and Hadramaut. Rural Yemenis with insufficient caloric and nutrient intakes are at risk for malnutrition. Furthermore, hunger and the social problems that are associated with it are creating a culture of distrust of government, and exacerbating stability in rural areas.

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